

OUR VIEW

To help Wausau grow, vote yes on school referendums

It's easy to get confused by the complexities of the two Wausau School District referendums that the district's voters will face April 7. The questions are long; the referendums themselves are seeking to address a number of different issues at once. It's been more than a decade since the district has had a building referendum; it's the first time ever that it has asked to exceed state revenue limits.

Question 1 asks for \$29.6 million for building and construction projects; spread over 20 years and factoring in significant state aid reimbursement, the tax impact of these projects would be \$12 per year per \$100,000 in property value. Question 2, dealing with information technology infrastructure, asks for \$2 million per year for five years. The shorter term means the tax impact of Question 2 is \$21 per year per \$100,000.

What would Wausau get in return?

Early childhood improvements.

If approved in Question 1, the district would shutter its A.C. Kiefer Educational Center, a 4-year-old kindergarten center. Kiefer is an aging facility and something of a money pit for the district. But besides the financial reasons to find a new facility, closing it would also create an educational opportunity for the youngest kids the district served. The district's plan is to consolidate its nine 4-K sites into "learning academies" at four schools. This is an important step forward. It will help the district focus its 4-K program and will make it much easier for at-risk kids to get the help they need.

Better buildings. The Kiefer school is the only one that would be closed under the proposal, and that decision comes after years of study and facilities consultation. For Kiefer, it is not a close call: It's simply too expensive to remodel it. The same is not true of other facilities. The proposal includes extensive remodeling and the expansion of many school buildings. It doesn't create any single massive new project — no spaceship-like sports arenas, no showpiece school-of-the-future — but instead makes needed improvements to multiple existing buildings, including both East and West high schools. Facilities matter, and the planned renovations and expansions have been carefully aligned with future enrollment needs.

More technical education opportunities. As anyone who has read Gannett Wisconsin Media's "State of Opportunity" series knows, employers in Wisconsin see a serious gap now and a seriously growing one between the jobs employers need and the readiness of the workforce. A portion of the funding on Question 1 will go directly to expansion of technical education programs such as automotive training, manufacturing training in metals, robotics, agriculture and

more. Providing strong, hands-on practical instruction in trades and technical work will help strengthen Wausau's future workforce, and will help further meet a current need.

A technology upgrade.

The second referendum question deals with everything from phone systems and Internet connections to Smart Boards and student devices. About half of the funds that would be raised if Question 2 is approved would go to upgrading schools' infrastructure needs: cables that connect the schools, connections that keep, say, the phones from going down. The rest would go toward a district program for student devices and teacher training on how to use them effectively as teaching tools. It is simply impossible to separate technology from learning — that was true in the days of slates and chalk, and it's true today. The district needs working Internet systems and up-to-date infrastructure.

The dollar figures the district is asking for are big numbers, even if the tax impact to any individual is relatively manageable. So it may be better to consider this set of goals the district is setting out to accomplish and decide whether they are important to the future of the community.

We submit that early childhood education, school facilities that aren't overcrowded, vocational education and up-to-date technology systems are each vitally, centrally important to the district's goal of providing a strong education to every student.

The district did its homework. These proposals are carefully designed, aligned with specific and important priorities, and they come after literally years of public input and careful study of facilities needs and educational needs.

The quality of our schools can be a community asset for Wausau and a recruiting tool for helping aid future growth. But that requires investment, and the proposals laid out here are wise investments. We endorse a yes vote on both Wausau School District referendum questions.

THE QUESTIONS

Question 1

Shall the Wausau School District, Marathon County, Wisconsin be authorized to issue pursuant to Chapter 67 of the Wisconsin Statutes, general obligation bonds in an amount not to exceed \$29,565,000 for the public purpose of paying the cost of: capital maintenance projects throughout the District; constructing additions to and making related facility renovations and site improvements (including play area, athletic field and parking improvements) at G.D. Jones Elementary School, Hawthorn Hills Elementary School, Riverview Elementary School, Thomas Jefferson Elementary School, Wausau East High School and Wausau West High School; demolition of A.C. Kiefer Educational Center and restoration of the related site; and acquiring related fixtures, furnishings and equipment?

Question 2

Shall the Wausau School District, Marathon County, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91. Wisconsin Statutes by \$2,000,000 per year for a period of five years on a non-recurring basis beginning with the 2015-2016 school year and ending with the 2019-2020 school year, for the purpose of funding the District-approved technology plan?

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